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GERMANY AND THE GRECO-ROMAN TRADITION

BY EMILE BOUTROUX

WE have certainly no more important duty towards the present and, even more especially, towards the future, than to endeavor to form a correct conception of the significance of this war, which, as has been rightly said, is not merely a battle of forces, but a conflict of ideas. What we have to find out is in what direction humanity is headed.

Among the opinions which are held in regard to it is one that at first sight seems strange, but that nevertheless is based upon certain profound historical and philosophical considerations. We hear from more than one side that this war is in reality a rivalry between germanism and romanticism—an opinion which when first heard appears quite simple and natural. But when the persons to whom I allude make use of these terms, they have a different meaning in mind than the ordinary and obvious one.

In fact, while our first impulse is to believe that those who express themselves thus mean that the Germans are fighting for germanism and the Allies for the classic tradition, they intend to say that in the present war the Germans are fighting for the Latin ideal while the Allies are fighting for true germanism; so that it would be the Allies who were the true Germans, while the Central Powers would represent a survival of the Roman world.

How can such assertions be proved?

It is asserted that germanism in its primitive and real meaning signifies the cult of liberty and individuality, while the Greco-Roman civilization means the reducing of individuals to the condition of passive organs in an all-powerful

State. The Roman Empire is antiquity's legacy to the modern world; Liberty, as an inherent property, divine and sacred, of the human being—that is the Teuton ideal.

Having started with such premises, it is easy to reach the following conclusions: "Do not let ourselves be misled by appearances or by words. The present war is really the conflict between the primitive and true Germany with the Germany latinized and alienated from herself by Prussia. In this war it is the Allies who are fighting for the Germanic principle, while the sham Germans are fighting for the Roman principle."

What shall we think of such opinions, expressed or implied in numerous writings to-day?

The argument implies first of all this postulate: that there is a gulf between the present Germany, said to be prussianized, and the primitive Germany, and that modern Germany is, speaking by the letter, the negation and antithesis of the old Germany.

Certainly there is a big difference between *Ach! wie ist's möglich dann* and *Was blasen die Trompeten*. But is it right to assert that between the old Germany and the Germany of to-day there has been a complete break in continuity, and that the present Germany is a mad dog (reduced to that condition by the influence of Prussia alone), and that all she needs is proper treatment to make her once more a gentle and faithful dog?

The history of Germany does not confirm this hypothesis. The Prussians are Germans. Since the seventeenth century, and particularly after the Seven Years War (1756-1763), they have been hailed by the representative German thinkers as the predestined champions of unity and, in consequence, of German supreme power. The great German thinker of the seventeenth century, Leibnitz, claimed imperiously for Germany all the countries which had formerly been attached, by any bond whatever, to the Roman Empire of the German Nation.

As for this Holy Roman Empire—its motto was the superiority of the temporal power over the spiritual power, for the reason that force comes before right, which without it has no real existence. *Macht geht vor Recht*, as Bismarck said.

I read in a book which is highly thought of in Germany, *Deutsche Kultur und Sittengeschichte* by Johannes Scherr,

that that which characterized the primitive German society was the absolute distinction between the *Freie* and the *Unfreie* (the free and the non-free): the former enjoyed all the rights, the latter had none, and this was so not only legally, but in fact; the non-free being treated actually as things.

Now, is it not this same radical distinction between the free and the non-free—the latter the simple instruments of the former—which we find again in the conception of a world such as the Germans of to-day are fighting for: on one side the race of masters (*das Herrenvolk*), on the other, the races conquered, managed and exploited by the Germans?

From one end of Germany's history to the other runs this duality: of those who possess all the rights, and those who possess none, or only the reflexes of them which emanate from the dominating power. This régime antedates the existence of Prussia, and it does not come from Rome; it originates in Germany. The Germans who are Germans only feel themselves born, some to command as despots, others to obey like slaves; and they extend this conception of human relations over the whole of humanity.

If the conception of germanism in the thesis which I am discussing seems contrary to facts, what shall we say of the manner in which the classic tradition is expressed by this same thesis?

It is strange that the endeavor should be made to sum up this tradition in the concept of the Roman Empire, with the pretext that this form of social organization was chronologically the last which classic antiquity evolved. Suppose that a man lives one hundred and fifty years, would it be logical to say that his condition at his final hour sums up and contains all that he has been, so that if one desires to find out the essential quality of his philosophy, all that is needed is to record his last mutterings? It is only in Hegelian dialectics that the chronological order is confused with the logical order, and that Beethoven, considered as the synthesis of Bach and of Mozart, dispenses with both of them.

Classic antiquity contained other things than the birth or the development of imperial despotism. We read in Homer: "Let the stranger and the suppliant be a brother to thee," and in Terence: "I am a man and nothing human is foreign to me." In Seneca we read: "'They are slaves', you say.

No, they are men." Classic antiquity undoubtedly was familiar with the legal distinction between slaves and free men, but the gentleness of custom tempered the harshness of the laws, and philosophers proclaimed the dogma of the dignity and equality of human kind. Justice and the law—the latter the expression of the former—this is the real legacy of Greece and Rome; this is what those ancestors stand for.

Still further: the Roman Empire itself, the corrupted expression of the antique ideal, as the dying republican hero expressed it: "the victorious cause had the gods on its side, but the vanquished cause has Cato." "*Victris causa diis placuit, sed victa Catoni.*" The Roman Empire is in no way to be compared to the German Empire.

It is undoubtedly its historical predecessor; it is its mirage which from the ninth to the twentieth century never ceases to hover before the German imagination and which inspires in them an incoercible desire for unity as a condition of force and domination. But between a historical predecessor and its successor, by what right can one *a priori* claim an identity? Pascal said rightly: "the same thoughts sometimes develop differently in other minds than in that which conceived them." The German Empire, created to re-awaken for the profit of Germany the ancient Roman Empire, is Roman only in its historical genesis; in reality, it is truly *das deutsche Reich*, the Teuton Empire.

The Roman Empire was an organization founded upon absolute power that was looked upon as divine, and it is only too well known that this power often proved itself despotic—this characteristic of the Roman Empire which from ancient times has been condemned by all those nourished by the classic spirit, finds defenders to-day only in the country of Mommsen and Treitschke.

But there was something more in the Roman Empire than its autocratic form of authority. Nero and Domitian cannot make us forget Titus and Marcus Aurelius. The Empire was Roman, and in it the political, moral and social ideas of which Rome had made her substance survived in it. The Empire respected and favored that vigorous municipal life which had been one of the essential characteristics of the republican Roman civilization. The Empire did not treat nations like beasts of burden. It brought to them security, law, roads and education. The spirit in which it presented men with these essential necessities is manifested by the

results. The peoples did not detest Rome; they loved her. It was not they, but the Barbarians who destroyed the Roman Empire. Rome did not aim to uproot the originality and the liberty of nations. Gaul before being incorporated in the Roman Empire was divided in herself and fixed in her state of civilization. Roman Gaul became a nation and foreshadowed France.

In the same way Alsace, which before 1648 was only a collection of villages without any bond between them, with no objects of activity other than local interests, acquired a common conscience and became the Alsace of to-day as soon as she had entered the family of France.

The Roman Empire was a midwife of nationalities.

Is there any need to point out that the German-Prussian Empire does not resemble it in this? As early as 1763, German historians bear witness, the Prussians were detested; since then this hatred has continued to increase. In February, 1915, Dr. Magnus Kirchfeld of Berlin gave a lecture on the subject: *Eine schwierige Frage: warum hassen uns die Völker?* ("A difficult question: Why do the nations hate us?")

Let whoever wishes to know in what measure German domination favors the native development of nations look at the Austria of Charles I, and compare it with the Austria prior to 1866. To-day the Viennese blush for having been born in Vienna.

Modern Germany has been eager to take possession of the heritage of the Roman Empire, but she has exploited this legacy in her usual way, putting her mark upon it—historic continuity is not identity.

On the other hand, classic antiquity, by virtue of the same law, cannot be considered as adequately represented by the Roman Empire, on the plea that this régime was the chronological termination of its evolution. And the complete essence of the Roman Empire itself is not to be found in absolute power, simply because power represents the form. Antiquity lives on chiefly in her great monuments, literary, philosophical, judicial and artistic, in the ideas which she brought forth, developed and bequeathed to the world, clothed in immortal beauty.

If this is the heart of the truth, Germany has assuredly greatly narrowed and degraded her spirit, which was endowed with spaciousness and richness, in order to become

the egotistical and tyrannical master-people she intends to be to-day; but it is indeed within herself that she has found the anti-human tendencies which have caused her to borrow from antiquity just that which was most evil and reprehensible in antiquity.

And if those nations which are attached to the antique ideal have also fallen from the path—though in a spirit generally very different from the German spirit—in their abuse of unification and assimilation, they have only to endeavor to distinguish in the heritage of antiquity the essential from the accidental; the eternal from the temporal, in order to uncover as the real foundations of human life the principles of liberty, moral equality, justice, equity, mutual sympathy and goodwill, a spontaneous collaboration for great ends—which are the characteristics belonging to that humanity whose dawn Greece and Rome lighted.

There is nothing to modify in the general estimate of the present war. Germany, which fights for the domination and the exploitation of the world, is fighting for a cause of German origin; and the Allies, who are fighting for liberty, for moral equality and solidarity, for justice and right, for the cause of nationalities, are fighting also to save the essence of the classic tradition, united—let us be careful not to forget—to the Christian tradition.

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